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FOR WHA/BSC AND WHA/CCA

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TAGS: ETRD ETTC PREL CU UY

SUBJECT: SUSPENSION OF TITLE III OF LIBERTAD ACT - URUGUAY

REF: STATE 57782

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires James D. Nealon  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Upon taking office on March 1, 2005, the left-of-center Frente Amplio Government immediately renewed diplomatic relations with Cuba, which had been previously suspended by the Batlle administration. This move appeared to have been a gesture by President Vazquez to the more radical elements of his coalition, including ForMin Gargano, a strong proponent of expanded ties with Cuba. Gargano and the more radical elements of the Frente regularly criticize the U.S. embargo on Cuba. The GOU opened an Embassy in Cuba on June 30, 2005, and Cuba's ambassador to Uruguay was sworn in on November 7, 2005.

¶2. (C) There have been two ministerial-level visits to Cuba, one in January 2006 by Social Programs Minister Arismendi (Communist Party) and the other in April 2006 by Health Minister Munoz, who accompanied a group of Uruguayan patients for treatment in Cuba. Last year, the GOU accepted Cuba's offer to conduct ophthalmological interventions free of charge for Uruguayan cataract patients, under a program called "Operacion Milagro" ("Operation Miracle"). About 400 patients have been treated so far, and Minister Munoz recently accompanied another group of 123 patients to Cuba. The initiative has raised protests from the Uruguayan association of ophthalmologists. The Cuban government also offers scholarships for Uruguayan medical students. In 2005, 43 Uruguayan medical students graduated in Cuba. Post is not aware of any Uruguayan investments in Cuba or Cuban investments in Uruguay, nor of any bilateral trade agreements between Uruguay and Cuba.

¶3. (C) All in all, the GOU's involvement with Cuba appears to be limited to a few areas of medical cooperation and to some expressions of support by the more radical elements of the Frente Government. Minister Arismendi was ridiculed by large sections of the Frente and by the opposition when she suggested, upon her return from Cuba, that the GOU apply Cuban ""experiences"" in the area of education. While Post is not aware of any declarations by the GOU criticizing the human rights situation in Cuba, ForMin Gargano had to publicly admit that Cuba is not a democracy, after he was criticized for suggesting that Cuba be admitted into Mercosur in May 2005. Other Mercosur members and several of Gargano's Cabinet colleagues pointed out to Gargano that Cuba would not fulfill the ""democracy clause"" condition for Mercosur membership.

Nealon